

COMMENTARY

WILL SOVIET ANTI-SEMITISM TEACH THE LESSON?

For Most Britishers, It Has

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LONDON

IT IS now three months since the anti-Jewish campaign in the Soviet orbit got under way with the Prague "trial," and a month since it spread from the circumference to the center of Stalin's empire, with the Moscow radio's revelations about the "doctors' plot." Three months is long enough for journalists, writers, teachers, and other professional generalizers to make up their minds on any current topic, let alone one that is as familiar as anti-Semitism. Three months is also sufficient time for Stalinists and fellow-travelers to complete the switch from one position to another. As

THE anti-Semitic campaign now going on in the Communist world has created in the West one of those periodic crises of educated thought which are so often called forth by the internal convulsions of the "workers' fatherland." So far as England is concerned, GEORGE LICHTHEIM reports, the crisis may be bringing some incidental but not unimportant benefits, especially in clearing away that sentimental fuzziness towards Communism which has afflicted various strata of society, including some sections of the Jewish community, and, consequently, in removing that last thin basis for the reactionary identification of Communism with "the liberals" and "the Jews." Mr. Lichtheim, an editor of the British monthly *Twentieth Century*, has been a frequent contributor to COMMENTARY. His most recent article in our pages was "Behind the 'Anti-Americanism' of Mr. Bevan" (July 1952).

of this date it can be said that the literary battle fronts on this new sector of the cold war have hardened into immobility. The shock has been absorbed, and trench warfare has begun. As every soldier knows, this involves not only tossing grenades at the enemy but also coping with small, agile creatures who infest one's underwear. Let us therefore begin by shining a light on some of the latter.

It is indicative of the shock sustained by the Stalinist and Stalinoid organizations in this country that the active defense of their position in the sub-intellectual world has involved a call-up of veterans. Normally it would have been enough to mobilize some "liberal" dummies and put their signatures to letters to the *New Statesman* and the *Manchester Guardian*; but this time conditions were not normal. The fellow-travelers were abandoning the party in droves, and in some districts—mainly in London—demoralization was spreading on a scale comparable only to the situation in 1939 after the signing of the Stalin-Hitler pact. In consequence the main burden of defense has fallen on such hardened veterans as Mr. Andrew Rothstein and Professor Hyman Levy, whose letters have in recent months filled countless correspondence columns in the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Jewish Chronicle*. Not, however, in the

New Statesman. For Mr. Kingsley Martin's organ, though duly contemptuous of the Prague and Moscow "revelations"—did not the Public Prosecutor in Prague have the bad taste to incriminate Mr. Alexander Werth, the *New Statesman's* impeccably neutralist Paris correspondent?—is not, if one may so put it, overanxious to depress its readers by dwelling too much on these unsavory topics. There are, after all, other things to write about. Kenya, for example, and the Sudan. When the Moscow "revelations" burst like a bomb in January, the *New Statesman* was alone in keeping its head and its sense of proportion. Others might give way to excitement and devote their headlines to the subject, but Mr. Martin knew what he owed his readers. His front page was devoted to Egypt. Criticism of the Kremlin's latest blunder followed, *sotto voce*, in small print. Correspondence on the subject has also been kept within reasonable bounds. When Mr. Benjamin Frankel, musical composer and party veteran of twelve years' standing, announced his disillusionment, the *Statesman* printed his letter and some subsequent correspondence, but did nothing to encourage a full-scale debate. There is a time and a place for everything; at a moment when British administrators are under fire in Kenya for infringing tribal rights and customs, and when the wraps have been taken off the Chinese on Formosa, the weekly oracle of the left would be untrue to its main purpose if it devoted excessive space to the doings in Moscow. Chiang Kai-shek is a clear and present danger. As for the Russians, who is to know *what* goes on in their mysterious country?

BUT to return to our trench veterans: if Messrs. Levy and Rothstein have been mobilized for the duration of the present emergency, the reason of course is that the British Communist party, being a sect and not a mass organization, cannot do without Jewish support as easily as the Continental parties. We have not yet reached the point recently attained in France, where M.

Monmousseau of the local politburo wondered aloud in public why so many socialists had and have "foreign" names like Blum, Moch, and Mayer. "These are not French names, such as Thorez or Cachin," he stated, according to *Humanité*. You won't find remarks of that kind in the London *Daily Worker*. Its editors have been busy for the last three months "proving" to their readers that there is no anti-Semitism behind the Curtain. Party membership in London is down to 75 per cent of last year's figure according to the latest official tabulation published in the party press, and it is no secret that losses have been heaviest in Jewish districts, where two decades of fascist-Communist street brawls had established what seemed like a firm tradition of Communist pro-Jewish bias, and where disillusionment has been correspondingly sharp. Similar repercussions are reported from Manchester and other heavily Jewish areas. No wonder Messrs. Levy and Rothstein are kept busy writing letters, addressing Jewish meetings, denouncing "anti-Soviet hysteria," and explaining the distinction between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism.

Professor Levy in private life is an author of undistinguished tracts on Soviet Marxism; Mr. Rothstein, until last year a lecturer at the London School of Slavonic Studies, is best known to the public as an indefatigable propagandist of Stalinism. The present emergency has not dulled his journalistic facility, but there is evidence that he is failing to stem the rout. All this, of course, applies only to the pro-Communist fringe. There have been no public defections from the hard core of party officials, and in all probability there won't be any. Since 1939, when the politburo split openly over the Nazi-Soviet pact, the British Communist party has been thoroughly Stalinized. Whatever the leaders may think in private, they are keeping their opinions to themselves.

The anti-Jewish campaign, nonetheless, has come at an awkward moment. Since the end of the war, the party has been a declining force. This fact, however, must be placed in a longer perspective. From its

foundation after the First World War until 1935, the membership count rarely exceeded 5,000. From then on, under the impact of Hitler, the Popular Front, and the Spanish Civil War, it rose to 11,000 in 1936 and 22,000 in 1941. The German invasion of Russia in that year sent it soaring to 60,000 in 1943. That, however, was the high-water mark. At the time of Labor's electoral victory in 1945, membership stood at 50,000, by mid-1950 it was down to 39,000, and by March 1951 it had fallen to 35,000. It is now probably below 30,000. The circulation of the *Daily Worker* tells the same story. At the beginning of 1949 average daily sales were 125,000, whereas for the second half of 1951 they averaged 97,500. The advent of the Conservative government later in that year gave the paper a lift, but in recent months it has sagged again owing to defections among Jewish readers and vendors—those earnest young men who sell it at street corners, since it is not obtainable at the regular newsstands.

All this is not to say that the organization is collapsing, but it has sustained a blow, and the Stalino-liberal penumbra surrounding it has shrunk perceptibly. It may expand again, but the principal appeal will from now on have to be directed less towards fellow-traveling "cosmopolitans" and more towards native-born elements attracted by the party's anti-Americanism—which is still its strongest card since dislike of America is perhaps the only sentiment that all classes of British society have in common.

IT is more difficult to measure the effect of the latest Soviet happenings on that section of the Labor party which until recently still regarded the Soviet Union and the Communist movement as erstwhile allies unaccountably gone astray. Labor organs like Mr. Bevan's *Tribune* or the vaguely Bevanite *Reynolds* (the latter a Sunday paper with an estimated circulation of 700,000) have always carefully avoided treating the Stalinists as irreclaimable enemies. The *Tribune* some months ago even accepted advertisements for Communist publica-

tions. Since the Prague and Moscow happenings its editorials have been suitably indignant in tone, but that is no guarantee against future backsliding. Mr. Bevan is a genuine Social Democrat, but his hold on principle has always been somewhat shaky. In 1942 he thought the murder of Alter and Erlich deplorable but unimportant in comparison with his own campaign to embarrass the Churchill government by clamoring weekly for the immediate opening of a second front in the West. He is sure to feel the same about the Kremlin's discovery that most Jewish doctors are professional poisoners. Since a good many Jews have themselves only awakened to the real nature of Stalinism as a result of the latest turn of events, this relative indifference to principle should perhaps not be judged too harshly.

It must also be remembered that Mr. Bevan naturally accepts the advice of his Jewish friends in the Labor party, who happen to have a distinguished appeasement record where the USSR is concerned. It is not long since Sidney Silverman, MP, and his colleague, Ian Mikardo (who sits on the Labor party executive alongside Mr. Bevan), were prominent in all sorts of bridge-building efforts. They are not fellow-travelers, far from it; they merely consider that "one must try to understand the Russians with their very different mentality," etc. Their hero was and is the late Harold Laski, whom they sincerely look upon as an original thinker and an ornament of the socialist course. Their spirit, if that is the right word, unfortunately permeates the Labor party at the local level, where the faithful gather in anticipation of the annual party conference. It is probably too much to hope that their eyes have been permanently opened.

IN contradistinction it can be said that the educated minority in this country has now closed ranks. The small but important Liberal party has always been hostile to Stalinism, and its influence carries over into the universities and the teaching profession.

The *Manchester Guardian* is still the oracle of a very large and important section of the educated class—which, it must be remembered, is in Britain sharply set off from the remainder. There are advantages and drawbacks in the presence within society of a self-contained elite which includes most of the politically active minority. Among the advantages is the disproportionate influence of what are elsewhere known as “organs of minority culture.” An issue on which the intelligentsia has made up its mind is pretty well a closed issue so far as this country is concerned. Anti-Semitism is such an issue. Since the Hitler experience, and despite the Palestine conflict, there has been a kind of tacit recognition that anti-Semitism (genuine anti-Semitism, that is, as distinct from private dislike of Jews) is a disease.

It is not that more people are fond of their Jewish neighbors, and it must be said that British audiences have been flabbergasted by American films like *Crossfire* and *Gentleman's Agreement* which seem to preach the moral—to an Englishman wholly incomprehensible—that we should all like and admire our fellow men, and get over our emotional “prejudices,” whatever that may mean. The average Briton, whether educated or not, has not the smallest intention of yielding any of his prejudices against Jews, Germans, Russians, Negroes, or even Americans. He has merely come to the conclusion that systematic Jew-hatred is a dangerous kind of lunacy in which he does not intend to participate; that is all, and it is quite sufficient to sink the Soviet government in the public estimation, and particularly in the estimation of the educated minority which reads papers like the *Times*, the *Manchester Guardian*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Observer*, and the political weeklies.

The size of this minority is not impressive; it probably does not exceed half a million, and the active opinion-forming group within it is of course once again much smaller. But it controls literally everything: the government, Parliament, the civil service, the universities, the churches, the schools, the press, and the BBC. The social hier-

archy is so arranged that opinions formed at the top filter downward at incredible speed and with scarcely any resistance. In 1939 the country changed over from appeasement to a warlike temper literally within weeks of Hitler's entry into Prague. It is true that popular instincts had been aroused, but it is also true that the lightning-like change occurred only after the educated minority had closed ranks. It has long done so on the issue of anti-Semitism, and the first blasts of Malenkov's trumpet, with their not so faint evocation of the late Joseph Goebbels, set up a chain reaction which within twenty-four hours had established a very definite climate of public opinion. Here was an issue on which everyone save the Stalinists could unite: the Kremlin had entered upon the malignant inheritance of the Third Reich. Well, so much the better. It simplified matters for everyone save some of the *New Statesman's* readers, and even they could give vent to civilized regret that their favorite country should sink so low. On the day after the Kremlin announcement that Jewish physicians had assassinated, or tried to assassinate, some of the country's leading generals, admirals, and bureaucrats, there was unanimity in the clubs and in the pubs on at least one subject: that there must be something rotten in the Soviet fabric. Some said it with regret, others with pleasure, but no one save the hard core of party fanatics dissented.

As a by-product it can be said that anti-Semitism has finally become impossible, at least in public. This is not contradicted by the statement that people's “normal” feelings about Jews have remained unchanged. As before, Conservatives will be slightly less friendly to Jews than are Liberals or socialists; as before too, the working class will be distinctly more inclined to traditional and emotional “prejudice” than the middle class, and the middle class more than the elite. But that is immaterial. It was the habitual association of the terms “Jew” and “Communist” which fed whatever genuine sub-surface anti-Semitism there was,

and this association has been killed stone-dead. And thereby the Soviet government has done an immense service to Jews in this country, and probably in other countries too.

For the association was there, and not merely because Jews were conspicuous among fellow-travelers and because in some districts the Communist party was largely a Jewish organization. For all one knows, Jews will now become known as Bevanites (they are already beginning to become so known in some Labor areas). But that is a very different matter. What troubled people was the thought that some members of the community might be constitutionally liable to catch the infection, and this suspicion has been killed so far as the Jews are concerned. Its persistence was of course not due to the treachery of a few individuals—and as it happens the most conspicuous case, that of the physicist Pontecorvo, concerned an Italian Jew, i.e. a “foreigner”—but to the sentimental pro-Sovietism displayed by a great many Jews, but especially by those of East European origin. It has taken a generation for the process to work itself out, until the day when the Moscow *New Times* (*Novoye Vremya*—as it happens also the title of the Black Hundred periodical founded in 1876) reverted to the tradition of its spiritual ancestors, the Russian anti-Semites of the czar’s regime. On that day the Tory superstition that “Bolshevism” had something to do with the Jews finally gave up the ghost. Even the mildest and most attenuated form of anti-Semitism is now no longer respectable in army messes, clubs, or universities. The Conservatives will go on disliking Jews, but they will no longer mutter that Jews are dangerous radicals. *That* myth is dead. Hitler did something to kill it, and now Stalin has completed the process. There was hardly any need for those twin pillars of official respectability, the BBC and the *Times*, to make the obvious point that the Kremlin was trying to win over the former Nazis in Eastern Germany and the former pogrom-organizers throughout Eastern Europe. Even if the man in the street did not immediately get the point, he was informed

the next day by his morning paper that the Russians had gone Hitler one better by discovering a Jewish conspiracy at the very center of government. To say that he was “shocked” would be to employ journalese in order to describe what was in reality a more subtle emotion. It would be truer to say that he gave vent to a sigh and a shrug: another illusion gone down the drain; the Russians after all were no better than the Germans.

THE change is naturally most marked where previously patriotic suspicion of Jewry as a potential carrier of propaganda germs had been most ingrained: in the Tory milieu and in the popular press which serves it. Here two emotions have long been in conflict: the national tolerance of minorities and the equally national dislike of people who are somehow not fully integrated into the community and who persist in voicing outlandish opinions. Jewish emotional identification with Israel is reluctantly accepted: it is after all no different from the affection which the Irish in Britain show for Mr. de Valera’s republic. Jewish sympathy for Russia was something very different; it was dangerous and smacked of disloyalty. The collapse of this emotional relationship—outside the narrow circle of the party faithful who are anyhow regarded as incurable—has cleared the atmosphere. One has only to read the Beaverbrook press—a veritable compendium of suburban Conservative *Weltanschauung* on every subject from religion to movies—to perceive the greatness of the change. Papers like the *Daily Express* (circulation over four million), which a few months ago were subtly unfriendly to everything Jewish, without ever overstepping the invisible boundary drawn by “minority” public opinion, have turned round so completely as to forget even their grudge against Israel. The older, saner, slightly sentimental fellow-feeling for the Jews has come back with a rush.

There is even a hint of popular superstition of the kind which presages a bad end for all persecutors of Jewry. At a more

sophisticated level one encounters a writer like Bertrand de Jouvenel confidently prognosticating, in the columns of the *Manchester Guardian*, the speedy collapse of Stalin's empire. Why? Again, because persecution *must* be the last resort of a crumbling tyranny. This kind of optimism is probably unfounded, but it shows that Stalin and Hitler are now regarded as birds of a feather. Compared with the prevailing atmosphere ten years ago, at the time of Stalin-grad, the change is almost immeasurable, and of course wholly to the good.

THUS the Kremlin's calculated essay in "controlled" anti-Semitism may be said to have served as a catalyst in bringing together and consolidating a mass of floating emotions and opinions about the Soviet Union, and about the Jews. In both respects, a great deal of nonsense has been blown away by the cold blast of reality. That, of course, is not how the matter is perceived by the average Jew in this country, who rather tends to be anxious and bewildered: anxious for the two and a half million Jews behind the Iron Curtain, and bewildered by the collapse of a fairly stout pillar of his secular political faith: the belief that the Soviet government, whatever else it might do, would never, never imitate the czar and initiate cold pogroms. Now that disillusion-

ment has come, it may perhaps be permissible to observe that there was something rather ignoble, as well as foolish, about this determination to shut one's eyes to minor details like the liquidation of the kulaks and the existence of forced labor, so long as the regime did not advertise its basic anti-Semitism (whose existence has been obvious to most observers since the 1930's). And it is also noticeable that a good many Jews, though resentful and hurt, still fail to see that persecution of Jews is no different from persecution of Armenians, and equally to be expected from a totalitarian regime.

But this kind of myopia is too basic a constituent of human nature to deserve much censure. What matters is that the breach has been made and fresh air is coming into the intellectual sickroom so long inhabited by a minority of Jews in this country. The Soviet myth has collapsed for some of its most persistent and sentimental devotees, including many who were never Communists. The proof is to be encountered daily in the columns of the Jewish and non-Jewish press, at public meetings and student reunions, and in private gatherings. Even those indefatigable trench-fighters, Messrs. Levy and Rothstein, can't stem the tide. They are doing their best, but the odds are too heavy. The long nightmare is ending.